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In the lingo of cruising, classic often means old

THE SAVVY TRAVELER

PETER S. GREENBERG

"You'll sail on a classic," reads one cruise ship brochure. "A ship rich in history," boasts another piece of promotional literature.

It all sounds good.

But two questions remain unanswered: How old IS your ship? And should its age worry you?

The answers are not often easy to find, and an old cruise ship does not necessarily mean that the ship is a floating fire trap or a rust bucket on the verge of submerging.

As a passenger, it's not only nice to know where your ship has been and how old it is, but such information can also help you decide what cruise to take.

Some cruise line brochures and advertisements have been guilty of using misleading words to sell their cruise ships.

For example, a few years back, one Greek cruise line advertised sailings on the South American Riviera aboard their "new" ship, the Pegasus.

The ship was hardly new. In fact, it had already sunk once before as the Sundancer, on June 29, 1984, near Vancouver, Canada. (It was then resold to Epirotiki Lines in Athens, refloated and towed south out of Canada, through the Panama Canal and across the stormy winter swells of the North Atlantic a slow journey that ended 52 days later in Piraeus, Greece.)

The ship was fixed and then heavily advertised as the "new" Pegasus.

In 1985, when the Italian liner Achille Lauro was hijacked by terrorists in the Eastern Mediterranean, most of the press described the vessel as a "luxury cruise ship." But the ship was already 50 years old when the hijacking occurred and had a history of severe problems. The ship had suffered a number of fires and at-sea

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The Savvy Traveler

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was seized after Italian government authorities determined there had been "irregularities" in its casino operations. The Achille Lauro was later sold to Chandris lines and operated inexpensive Mediterranean sailings at the time of the hijacking.

Part of understanding a cruise ship's history is looking at the number — and the type — of owners who have sailed it.

In functional areas, older ships are potentially more troublesome. Plumbing is a major headache on older ships, followed by electrical problems. Maintenance costs are, not surprisingly, higher, which can mean — in some cases — that certain maintenance items are deferred because of the expense.

An important question to ask: Was the ship you're booked on built by the line that operates it?

If so, chances are the crew has been thoroughly trained on its equipment — and the engineering staff probably wrote the manuals.

If it wasn't, how many years has the ship sailed with this line? If the answer is less than three years, you're dealing with a crew that is still getting to know an older ship.

Interestingly, Carnival Cruise Lines (now the largest in the world) began with an older ship. In 1972, the company bought its first vessel, the Empress of Canada. On its maiden voyage, the ship ran aground. After an extensive refit (and subsequent renovations in recent years), the ship sailed again. It's called the Mardi Gras — and still sails with Carnival.

In 1975, Carnival bought the Empress of Britain (now called the Carnivale). And in 1977, the company purchased a ship called the S.A. Vaal, a liner that had been sailing between England and South Africa, and renamed her the Festivale.

Holland America has built many of its own ships, the most famous of which is the Rotterdam. The first Rotterdam sailed in 1873. Since then, there have been four other Rotterdams, including the current Rotterdam V, which was brought into service in 1959 and is still sailing. Companies like Holland America maintain the names of their ships, although the ships themselves are different.

The original Westerdam I (which sailed between 1946 and 1964) was built during World War II as a passenger and cargo carrier, but never commenced service until 1946 because the ship was sunk twice in the harbor. The first time the ship was sunk by the Dutch because they didn't want the Germans to be able to use the ship. The Germans sank the ship a second time near the close of the war when they didn't want the Dutch to get it.

The current Westerdam was once the Homeric, purchased by Holland America in 1988.

Problems can sometimes occur with successive ownership changes. Perhaps needed renovations — especially safety standard improvements — are not performed because the new owner lacks proper capital or is not required to upgrade the ship under current laws.

Some interesting cruise ship histories:

The Azure Seas, which now sails on three- and four-day cruises to Mexico from Los Angeles, was originally built as the Southern Cross. The unusual single-funneled ship sailed between England and Australia. Then, it was sold and became the Calypso; sold again, and became the Azure Seas. When it first started sailing from Los Angeles, the ship's crew was poorly organized, did not understand the machinery, and the ship was in major need of a renovation. After some shaky cruises and a host of passenger complaints, the ship was withdrawn from service and given an extensive renovation.

The Regent Star was built in 1957 as the Statendam. Later, it became the Rhapsody. It was refurbished in 1985 and 1987. Earlier this year, the ship suffered an electrical fire. The fire caused the ship's fuel pumps to shut down (this is standard safety practice) and when the main engines shut down, the ship lost propulsion and ran aground.

The Bermuda Star was built in 1957 as the Argentina. In 1972, it was purchased by Holland America and became the Veendam. Coincidentally, about two weeks after the Regent Star grounding, the Bermuda Star grounded on a rock ledge in the Cape Cod canal and suffered a 90-foot gash in its bottom plating. (There were no injuries.)

One of the more interesting histories belongs to a ship now called the Regent Sea. It was built in 1957 for the Swedish American line as the Gripsholm, sailing for 17 years as a trans-Atlantic liner. It was sold in 1974 to a Greek firm, Karageorgis Cruises. Renamed the Navarino, it cruised Mediterranean, South American and South African waters until 1981, when a serious fire broke out. After the ship was repaired it was put up for sale. The prospective buyer — Commodore Cruise Lines — insisted on a dry docking and thorough inspection of the ship before the deal was finalized. As the Navarino was lifted out of the water, the supports gave way and the vessel leaned against one side of the floating dock. The wall collapsed, the ship flooded through open side ports and foundered with a 35-degree list. Many of its accommodations and all the machinery spaces were under water. It was declared a total constructive loss.

At one point, the ship was going to be towed to Brazil to be used as a stationary floating hotel in San Paolo. But the deal never happened. Instead, it stayed in a shipyard near Athens for a few years.

Then, on Nov. 12, 1985, after undergoing extensive repairs, the ship was sold to Regency Cruises and entered service as the Regent Sea.

Anyone remember the S.S. Monterey? The ship, formerly sailing for Pacific Far East Lines out of San Francisco, was sold to a U.S. company a few years back to begin cruising around the islands of Hawaii, but the line went bankrupt. The ship was sold again to a Panamanian company and then chartered to Star Lauro of Italy for 12- and 14-day cruises of the Mediterranean.

Some older ships will never sail again, but they're still floating.

Remember the Italian liners Michelangelo and Raffaello? In 1977, the ships were taken from Genoa to Iran to be used as floating barracks.

But some older ships are still sailing. The Victoria, operated by Chandris, was built in 1936 as the Dunnotar Castle. The S.S. Britanis was built in 1932. The 58-year-old ship was once the Monterey, then the Matsonia and finally the Lurline.

Two of the older "superliners" of the past have been totally refurbished and modernized. Holland America's flagship, the 31-year-old S.S. Rotterdam, was given a $15 million renovation last October. And the 30-year-old S.S. Norway (formerly the S.S. France) recently completed a staggering $40 million refurbishment, including 135 new luxury staterooms, a new spa and an upgraded restaurant. (Passenger capacity was also increased, from 1,794 to 2,044).

And what about the Achille Lauro? The ship is still sailing the Mediterranean. Most recently, the ship was chartered to bring Irish and Egyptian soccer fans to Italy for the recent World Cup soccer. (If the ship can survive soccer fans, it can survive anything.)

Still, there are some benefits to sailing on an older ship. For one thing, it actually LOOKS like a ship. (Many of today's mega-cruise liners look more like huge condominiums that somehow float.) There seems to be more usable passenger space on older ships. These ships have promenade decks where passengers can truly promenade. And the ships have passenger cabins that are considerably larger in dimension.

In general, older ships usually carry fewer passengers, display a more thoughtful interior design (often using wood) and give more of a feeling of making a "passage" than simply taking a cruise.

Peter S. Greenberg is a syndicated columnist.

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